



Horatio Nelson is a British national hero. Who was he?

By the time he died, he was a man without an eye (his right one) and a man without an arm (his right one). Those losses occurred three years apart, but Nelson was undaunted.

In fact, he was undaunted most of his life. By the time he was 12, he joined the Navy and worked aboard a ship (HMS *Raisonable*) commanded by his uncle (Captain Maurice Suckling). When he was 20, he became a captain.

During his adult life, while working for the Royal Navy, he sometimes disregarded orders from his superiors (mostly to the betterment of his men and country). Two examples are:

- The Battle of Cape Vincent, where he defeated Spain in 1797; and
- The Battle of Copenhagen (in 1801), when he put a telescope to his blind right eye, allowing him to truthfully say he hadn't seen the signal to withdraw.

Horatio, who was later known as "Lord Nelson," was born in Burnham Thorpe, Norfolk on the 29th of September, 1758. His father was a clergyman who, together with his wife Catherine, had eleven children. Horatio was the sixth.

Nelson was not always famous and not always in high demand. After he married his wife (Francis Nesbit) on Nevis (a Caribbean island), he returned to England and spent five years on half-pay. For whatever reason, he just couldn't get a command.

Frustrated, Nelson needed a challenge.

When Napoleon decided to build an empire in Europe, Nelson had his chance to see action. He commanded a ship called the HMS *Agamemnon*, serving in the Mediterranean. There he helped to capture Corsica, then lost his right eye during the battle at Calvi. He lost his arm at the Battle of Santa Cruz (on the island of Tenerife) in 1797.

Nelson handed Napoleon a massive defeat during the Battle of the Nile, in 1798. When all the naval bombardments were over, Napoleon had a serious problem to solve. Nelson, and his men, had destroyed the Emperor's Nile fleet (including spectacular explosions of key vessels). Napoleon's hope of a direct trade route to India essentially went up in smoke that day.

By 1801, the boy-sailor had become a vice-admiral. He, and the Royal Navy, were proving that Britain was hard-to-beat at sea.

One battle was especially critical for Nelson and his country. Napoleon wanted to invade Britain. To do that, however, the French Emperor really needed a major sea victory. He hoped that boost of confidence would come at Cape Trafalgar (off the coast of Cadiz, in Spain) where a definitive battle took place on the 21st of October, 1805.

Lord Nelson, however, had other plans. His strategy, brilliantly innovative at the time, caused a dramatically different result than Napoleon had hoped-for.

A few hours after Nelson signaled his Trafalgar fleet with the famous words "England expects that every man will do his duty," he was fatally shot by a French sniper located on the mizzen mast of the *Redoubtable*.

Lord Nelson knew he was dying aboard his ship, the HMS *Victory*. Captain Hardy was nearby during those final moments.

Did Nelson have any last words? Did he have any special requests while he could still speak?

To answer that question, we turn to the Royal Naval Museum where we learn some interesting facts, compiled by a Nelson scholar (the late Dr. Colin White who was also the Museum's director).

As he was dying, Lord Nelson asked Captain Hardy to kiss him farewell. The following is the result of [Dr. White's research](#):

*There is little explanation required for the words as there were at least three eye-witness accounts that record that Nelson did actually ask Hardy to kiss him. These witnesses were: Surgeon William Beatty, Chaplain Alexander Scott and Purser Walter Burke.*

*These three are portrayed in the painting "[Death of Nelson](#)" by [Arthur Devis](#), considered to be the most authentic (the nearest thing to a photograph of the occasion) and they can be seen within inches of the dying Admiral and would, therefore, have heard what was said. On normal occasions, it could be assumed that one witness might be mistaken, but when three independent accounts agree, there is little room for doubt over what was said.*

*Beatty also records that Hardy not only kissed Nelson once, but twice - first on the cheek, then stood up, looked down at his dying Leader and friend, reluctant to leave him. He then bent down again and kissed him on the forehead.*

*Nelson was sinking fast by then and could not see clearly. He asked: "Who is that?" to which came the reply "It is Hardy." Nelson replied "God bless you, Hardy."*

*It was a very moving and poignant moment. It was consistent with Nelson's affectionate character that he should ask, in the darkness of impending death, for a gesture of tenderness from his closest professional associate and probably his closest male friend.*

How did Nelson's men preserve the body of this naval hero who saved England by defeating Napoleon at Trafalgar? They placed his remains in a cask filled with brandy, which they stored in an upright position, then shipped him back to England.

En route, during a stop in Gibraltar, it was discovered that Nelson's body had already absorbed much of the brandy. Wine spirits were added to the coffin since Nelson was still far from home. Because of bad weather, it took 4½ weeks before his ship reached Britain. It had been a long, arduous journey.

After an autopsy on his body, Lord Nelson was given a [state funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral](#) (on the 9th of January, 1806). Today, the barge which carried his coffin up the Thames River is part of an exhibit at the Royal Naval Museum.

Nelson was 47 years old when he died. His remains are buried in a crypt at St. Paul's.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

### **ISSUES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

**Horatio Nelson joined the Royal Navy at the age of 12 and was a captain by the time he was 20. Modern child labor laws would prohibit such events in today's world. Do you think Nelson's accomplishments, in his youth, contributed to his success as a man? Explain your answer.**

**Nelson was a tough commander, but he cared deeply for the men who served with him. If you were assigned to serve under someone like Admiral Nelson, what expectations would he have of you? What expectations would you have of him?**

**Lord Nelson's men did the best they could to preserve his body during the 4½ weeks it took for their ship to return home, to England. Why did they place his remains in alcohol?**

Credits:

This image depicts a painting known as "Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, 1758-1805." It was created by Lemuel Francis Abbott (1800).

Nelson did not sit for this portrait since he was away at the time it was needed to illustrate an article in the "Naval Chronicle." It was based on a study which the artist had made at an earlier time, [when Nelson was recovering at Greenwich Hospital](#) from the loss of his right arm.

The painting is currently located at the National Maritime Museum, in London. It is owned by Royal Museums Greenwich.

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### Horatio Nelson - Britain's National Hero

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